



FLASH GORDON

SAM SHERMAN

The Flash Gordon serials today are known as film classics to movie fans throughout the world. In fact, they are without doubt the best movie serials ever made — silent or sound.

The first of the trio of Gordon epics, FLASH GORDON, released by Universal in 1936, was a sensation in its day. It was one of the early futuristic films and was regarded as entirely fantastic. Today, many of its devices (in practical forms, of course) are being used due to scientific progress. The star was Buster Crabbe in the role of Flash. Jean Rogers (with long blonde tresses) played Dale Arden. Frank Shannon portrayed the bearded Dr. Zarkov. Charles Middleton menaced the Earth people as Ming the Merciless. Priscilla Lawson as Ming's daughter, Princess Aura, spent the whole film trying to get Flash for herself. Richard Alexander as Prince Barin aided the Earth people in their fight against Ming.

The story opens as the world finds itself being torn apart by electrical storms, fierce hurricanes and many other disastrous happenings. Flash Gordon and Dale Arden (at present, strangers to each other) are taking an airplane home when the plane encounters a tremendous electrical storm. The passengers parachute out. Flash and Dale come upon Dr. Zarkov and his strange rocket ship, and he tells them that he can save the world. They come with him in his ship and prepare for a trip to outer space.

The reason for the disturbances is a planet, Mongo, which is approaching Earth at a tremendous speed. Zarkov and party arrive safely on Mongo and find the ruler, Emperor Ming, is the cause of all the trouble. Ming intends to destroy the Earth.

Quote Ming: "I control completely the movement of my planet." Thus he is directing Mongo towards the Earth purposely. Flash decides to stop Ming but finds the task difficult. Flash discovers that planet Mongo is full of strange people and even stranger devices. He fights King Vultan and his giant bear. Vultan is a sort of Mongo Henry VIII, eating all the time between vicious encounters. Vultan later befriends the Earth people and fights with them against Ming the Merciless. Flash and his friends (including King Trim, the Lion Man; and Prince Barin) win their

SKYBIRD, Vol. 1, No. 1, August, 1961, is a Super Squadron Publication, published monthly by Ron Haydock, 2771 San Marino, Los Angeles 6, California. Price — 5¢ per copy. If a checkmark appears in the box to the right, you are scheduled to receive the next issue. If a circle appears in the box to the right, you'd better comment on this issue or you won't receive the next one. If nothing appears in the box, then you should quickly realize that the Super Squadron is a subversive organization of scoundrels and that you'll have to send in your 5¢ to receive the next issue.



battle against Ming, his High Priest and King Kala, the Shark Man. Ming is "apparently" killed at the end of the serial, and Barin set up as the rightful ruler of Mongo. Gordon and party return to Earth having saved the world.

FLASH GORDON was a 15 chapter serial and sometime in the late 1930's, Universal released it in a feature version called ROCKETSHIP. It is currently in release to theatres across the country. In the early 1950's, the serial was released to TV as SPACE SOLDIERS.

The second film, FLASH GORDON'S TRIP TO MARS was released again by Universal in 1938. Also in 1938, largely due to Orson Welles' famous "War of the Worlds" radio scare, the film was presented to the public in a feature version --- MARS ATTACKS THE WORLD.

This second Gordon serial is the most popular of all the films. It begins with the conquering space heroes from the first serial returning to Earth. However, a short time after their return, the Earth once again experiences strange hurricanes and various types of destruction. The cause of this trouble is traced to the planet Mars. Some sort of strange light-beam appears to be coming from this planet and beamed towards the Earth. This time Dr Zarkov (Frank Shannon), Flash Gordon (Buster Crabbe), Dale Arden (Jean Rogers, now with short brown hair) and Happy Hapgood (a reporter who is a stowaway in the rocket ship) leave for Mars to find out what is going on.

The source of the trouble is Ming once again (who wasn't killed due to some unknown trick in the last serial). Ming is egging on Asura, Queen of Magic (Beatrice Roberts), ruler of Mars. Asura has a tremendous machine called the Nitron Lamp. The ray from it is beamed at the Earth to extract the element Nitron from the atmosphere. This is the cause of the destruction of the Earth. Flash decides upon arrival on Mars to destroy the Nitron Lamp.

Asura is not the rightful ruler of the red planet. The real king (played by C. Montague Shaw) has been banished, by Asura, with others who were against her rule. These people have been turned into clay by her magic and are called the Clay People.

Flash, Dale, Zarkov and Happy are captured by the Clay People but befriend them. Flash promises to lift the clay curse and once again make them normal. This he does at the end of the 15th chapter. Prince Barin (Richard Alexander) of Mongo is also on Mars fighting Ming. Thus Flash and his friends have their 2 main goals:

- 1) to destroy the Nitron Lamp
- 2) to restore the Clay People as the legitimate rulers of Mars

Ming, throughout the film, catches Flash, subjects him to some type of death trap (endings of chapters) to have Flash escape at the start of the next episode. The serial ends with Flash destroying the Nitron Lamp and restoring the Clay People. Ming kills Asura and then appears to be killed as he enters the cavern of the "sacred fire dragon". Again the Earth people are victorious.

Until the next serial, that is...

FLASH GORDON CONQUERS THE UNIVERSE in 1940, released by Universal and running 12 chapters. This serial has 2 major cast changes --- Roland Drew instead of Dick Alexander as Prince Barin, and Carol Hughes instead of Jean Rogers as Dale Arden. This film is also the least known of the Gordon trio.

The story begins as "The Purple Death" menaces the Earth. This is a strange disease that kills people mysteriously and "leaves only a purple spot on the

forehead of the victim". The reason for "The Purple Death" is Ming, once again on his planet Mongo. His scientists have developed a "death dust" which filters its way down through space to the Earth. Flash, Dale and Zarkov take their rocket ship to Mongo again and see their friend Prince Barin.

They learn of the "death dust" and its only antidote — Polarite. Polarite is a mineral which "totally neutralizes the effect of the death dust". It is only found in the extremely cold region of Mongo — Frigia. Only the people from that area, the Frigians, can survive in the extreme cold. However, Dr Zarkov invents a counter-freeze solution which enables the Earth party to go to Frigia and mine Polarite.

Ming's men cannot survive in that cold region, so he sends an army of robots, each one a walking bomb, to combat Flash's group. The robot menace is overcome by Flash and they set out to restore Barin as the correct ruler of Mongo.

Flash enlists the aid of the Rock People. They are a strange group who wear costumes which disguises them as rocks. They speak a strange language, but this is easy to understand to the gifted Dr Zarkov.

Flash and Ming lock horns throughout the remaining chapters and once again Ming is "apparently" destroyed. This time he is destroyed as part of a building explodes. Again the Earth people return home triumphant.

When shown on TV in the early 1950's, FLASH GORDON'S TRIP TO MARS was known as SPACE SOLDIERS' TRIP TO MARS. The third and last serial, FLASH GORDON CONQUERS THE UNIVERSE, was called SPACE SOLDIERS CONQUER THE UNIVERSE on TV.

A Historic Note of Film Gordonania is that in the mid-1950's King Features, who owns the character, decided to revive Flash and his friends for a European-made TV series starring Steve Holland as Flash, Irene Champlin as Dale and Joe Nash as Dr Zarkov.

(EDITOR'S NOTE — Another Historic Point of Gordonania, particularly to Tarsan fans, is the fact that Jim Pierce, who starred in TARZAN & THE GOLDEN LION, played King Thun, the Lion Man in the initial serial, FLASH GORDON. Buster Crabbe was the famed apeman in TARZAN THE FEARLESS. Hence, we have 2 Tarsans starring in the greatest serial ever filmed.)

In 1936, Dr Arthur W. Nye, head of the department of Physics at the University of Southern California made some interesting observations: "Although the scientific theories advanced in the screenplay FLASH GORDON are largely fiction and fantasy, they are based on sound scientific principles. Therefore, they are not utterly impossible in the future development of science." This can be seen in today's terrific satellites and rockets.

In the first serial, Universal created the Gocko, a tremendous fire dinosaur with lobster-like claws that menaced Buster Crabbe. Thun, the Lion Man, destroyed this horrible creation and thus saved Flash. Accidents on the set in 1936 were almost more thrilling than the film. Buster was forced through broken glass in a shattered swimming pool and into a tank. Fortunately, he escaped without any injuries. Priscilla Lawson touched an electronic machine with a wet hand and received quite a jolt.

It might be appropriate at this time to say a few paragraphs about Buster Crabbe, Flash Gordon himself.

In 1961, Buster is still the image of the daring spaceman Flash Gordon and

the many movie heroes he has played throughout the years. Today, without makeup, he looks better than he did in many old films and could very easily be Flash Gordon again for his many fans.

Buster likes discussing film production and the inevitable comparison between yesterday's and today's films. Speaking about the Gordon masterpieces, Buster says that the success of the serials was due to their production manager who made sure that the films were made on schedule and properly. Buster mentioned that he made the 1936 and 1938 Flash Gordons for Universal while still under contract to Paramount. This terminated in 1938 as he was making more films for Universal than he was for Paramount at the time.

Here is an interesting little story about the production of serials as Buster tells it:

"I couldn't manage to make a dental appointment until it fit into the Flash Gordon production schedule and they didn't need me for hours shooting."

Buster agreed with myself and many others that the Flash Gordons were the greatest serials ever made. Today, more than 20 years after their production, they are still as popular as ever. I mentioned to Buster that he was the "King of the Sound Serial Heroes", having made more than any other individual. These 10 cliff-hangers are:

- 1) TARZAN THE FEARLESS (Principal, 1934)
- 2) A little-known serial for Mayfair, 1934
- 3) FLASH GORDON (Universal, 1936)
- 4) FLASH GORDON'S TRIP TO MARS (Universal, 1938)
- 5) RED HARRY (Universal, 1938)
- 6) BUCK ROGERS (Universal, 1939)
- 7) FLASH GORDON CONQUERS THE UNIVERSE (Universal, 1940)
- 8) THE SEA HOUND (Columbia, 1942)
- 9) PIRATES OF THE HIGH SEAS (Columbia, 1949)
- 10) KING OF THE CONGO ("The Mighty Thunda")(Columbia, 1951)

Buster still enjoys viewing the Flash Gordons as some of his favorite productions due to their large-scale production and very interesting story and character angles. Who knows, with today's scientific developments, Buster Crabbe may again "Conquer the Universe" -- this time on an even large scale than in 1938.

Without a doubt, the fans are waiting for this to happen:

THE SUPER SQUADRON IS COMING — WATCH FOR IT!!!

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